

Interviews: Notes and Assignment

One of the purposes of this part of the I-search paper is to get students to think about learning things from the experts, not just the Internet.

Experts can be of any age. They might be seniors, adults, teens, or children. However, they are people who know a lot about your topic, and can add to your knowledge. Going straight to the person who studies or works with your topic means getting the newest ideas—the most current and up-to-date data. This makes your paper better.

The best interviews are face-to-face ones. Because you are young people, you may need to have your parents drive you to your interview; that's OK. But they can wait in the car, in the hall, or at another table—this is YOUR assignment.

The second-best kind of interview is a phone interview. You don't have transportation issues (yay!), but you also can't see your interviewee's body language, or interrupt easily if there is a problem or misunderstanding.

The least effective kind of interview is a snail-mail or e-mail interview, where you send the person a list of questions and they respond in writing. You can't ask for more info or for clarification, and it takes a lot longer to get done (especially if you're waiting on the Post Office to deliver both ends of the deal).

Steps in the interview process:

A. THE SET-UP

1. Identify your "expert"

Think about what sort of person would be a useful candidate for an interview. A professional who works in the field? An academic who studies your topic in particular? An author who has written books on your topic? A person in the local community who has dealt with an issue in his or her personal life? Identify that person and make arrangements to contact him or her. Authors can often be contacted through the publisher of their books or the editor of their journals (though this can take a couple of weeks). Scholars can often be contacted through their departments at universities, or through a campus directory. Professionals often have ads in the yellow pages of the phone book. Other individuals may be harder to track down. Allow yourself plenty of time to contact them.

2. First contact

When you first contact your interviewee, explain who you are, why you want to talk to them, and what you wish to find out. The purpose of the interview should be made clear to the interviewees before you meet them. They will need to know in general what kinds of questions you will ask, and approximately how long the interview will last.

3. Book 'em

Arrange a time to meet (for a face-to-face), a time to call them, or a date for an email exchange. If you meet face-to-face, pick a public location, but one with few distractions. Many people will feel most comfortable if you interview them at their offices (i.e. on their home turf, where they feel at ease).

4. How will you record their responses?

Ask permission to cut-and-paste from their e-mail (if you are sending questions), or to record the interview on your iPod, phone, or a tape recorder. Some people will not be comfortable with that...you may have to take notes. Be prepared with some paper and a pen or pencil.

5. Be a good Scout—Be Prepared

Always have your questions ready and bring them with you to the interview. While you don't want to stick to a script, it's important to have your questions with you in case you get off-topic, distracted, or forget something. Also, be sure you have contact information (and give your interviewee a phone number at which you can be reached) in case one of you is late, forgets the appointment, or is called away on an emergency.

B. PREPARING THE INTERVIEW

1. What (not) to wear

Because you are representing ATSS, you are expected to wear your uniform to your interview. The only exception to this is if you must wear specific clothing because of the nature of the job/location (steel-toed boots and a hard hat at a construction site; a bathing suit if you'll be underwater for the interview, etc). Try to look professional—many adults have a poor image of teenagers, and we want them to have a good attitude toward you!

2. What was the question?

Have your questions prepared in advance. Decide if you want an informal, chatty interview (which can make interviewees feel more comfortable), or a more structured interview, which may cover your material more completely and be more time-efficient.

3. Um, I forget what you said...

Be prepared to record responses. Bring a notebook or clipboard with paper to jot down answers, or bring a recorder if the interviewee is OK with it. BY LAW, YOU MUST GET PERMISSION TO RECORD ANYONE. Ask in advance, so you aren't fumbling for a pen at the last second!

C. WHEN YOU FIRST MEET YOUR INTERVIEWEE

1. Be polite!

Introduce yourself and explain the purpose of your I-search. Shake hands and look your interviewee in the eye. Ask permission to sit down. It never hurts to dust off your manners—this person is giving up time for you, the least you can do is be nice! Thank your interviewee for giving you their time.

2. Mad skillz

Have good interview skills. Ask only one question at a time—don't jumble responses by trying to combine multiple questions at once. Encourage responses with body language, such as nodding, leaning forward, or saying, "uh huh" quietly as the interviewee is speaking. Try to keep your respondent on topic...steer them with your questions.

3. Stay neutral, but interested

Researchers suggest that the interviewer (that's you) should not show any strong emotional reactions. Strong feelings from you might change the responses to your questions, as the respondent tries to impress you, shock you, or give you what he/she thinks you want to hear.

Use open-ended questions (ones that ask for stories or information) instead of yes/no questions.

Don't put words in your interviewee's mouth, but let the respondent choose his/her own vocabulary and phrasing in answering.

Avoid judgmental or emotionally loaded questions. Asking someone “Do you think my father will die of cancer, since he’s smoked for 20 years?” is less likely to get a useful response than, “How at risk are people who smoke for 20 years?”

Be careful when asking “why” questions. Sometimes these suggest a cause-and-effect relationship that may not actually exist. Interviewees may feel like they have to justify themselves to you, and be reluctant to answer more questions.

D. OTHER GENERAL TIPS

1. Begin with simple, factual questions that the interviewee can easily answer. This will help put him/her at ease and make him/her more talkative later, for more complicated questions.
2. A good way to start is to ask about the interviewee’s publications or knowledge. For example, “How long have you studied X?” or “What made you interested in X?” These questions, called ice-breakers, help establish a relationship with the respondent. Later in the interview, you can ask more personal or controversial questions.
3. Ask questions about the present before moving on to questions about the past or the future. People have an easier time talking about what’s happening right now than they do in recalling the past or imagining the future.
4. The first question should be, “Before we begin, is there anything you want to ask about this interview?” and the last one should be an invitation for the interviewee to add any final points or comments of his own.
5. If you use a tape recorder or other recording device, check once in a while to see if it’s still on!
6. Thank your interviewee again at the end of the interview. Shake hands as you leave. Leave a good impression—you are an ATSS ambassador.

E. AFTER YOU ARE DONE

1. Review
Go over your notes and make sure you can read your writing while things are still fresh in your memory. Check the recording to see if there are any scratchy spots that you will have to fill in from your notes or memory.
2. Say “thanks”
It is polite to send a thank-you card or letter expressing your gratitude to the individuals you interview. Also, you should offer them a copy of your final paper, if they want one.
3. Cite it!
Be sure to include an entry in your Works Cited for the interview!

N. B. These tips were originally compiled by Kip Wheeler in 2002. The website originally appeared at the University of Oregon. Mrs. Cousar has adapted them for the ATSS I-search paper, September 2013.

Interview Assignment for I-Search Project:

1. Identify someone you would like to interview for your paper (see Mrs. Cousar or ask another teacher or adult for help if this is a problem).
2. Contact that person and set up an interview time.
3. Repeat steps 1 and 2 until you have someone to interview for your paper. **Note: you MUST interview ONE person for your paper. You are WELCOME to do more than one interview.**
4. **Write a list of 20 interview questions.** Turn this list in to Mrs. Cousar A.S.A.P. (as soon as possible). Make sure she has it by the due date: **SEPTEMBER 30.** (Earlier is better!)
5. After the interview, write a reflection on the interview process. Answer the following questions (you may always add more thoughts!):
 - a. What did you learn? Was the information helpful?
 - b. What else do you still want to know?
 - c. What other resources were you directed to during the interview? (Did your expert recommend a book, video, other expert, or other source?)
 - d. Do you understand your topic better? Why or why not?

This interview reflection ("interview write-up") is due OCTOBER 21.